

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Plant spring bulbs now for a big payoff next year

By Jim May

Spring may seem like a long way off, but planning for it now will pay dividends next year when your spring bulbs burst into bloom. Snowdrops, winter aconites and crocus peaking through the snow are sure signs that spring is on the way. Fall is the ideal time to plant spring flowering bulbs and November and early December are not too late.

Daffodils, tulips and hyacinths are the major spring bulbs, but don't overlook minor gems like the snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), winter aconite (*Eranthis cilicica*), windflower (*Anemone blanda*), Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*), grape hyacinth (*Muscari botryoides*) and others. Many of these less common plants bloom very early before trees have leafed out and thrive in the shade, making them ideal early spring flowers. Many of these minor bulbs spread rapidly, forming drifts of color in the garden.

A true bulb is defined as a modified, underground stem, usually surrounded by scale-like, modified leaves, and containing stored food for the enclosed shoots. Daffodils and tulips are bulbs. Crocus, thought by many to be a bulb, is actually a corm. A corm is a mass of fleshy tissue with a bud on the top surface. This tissue disintegrates as the stored food is used to produce roots and shoots. A new corm forms on top of the old one's remains. Other "bulbs" are actually tubers (winter aconites, alstroemeria, anemones) or rhizomes (lily of the valley).

Good quality bulbs produce good blooms. Usually the larger the bulb, the better it will bloom. Beware of "bargain" bulbs that are often too small to bloom the first season. There are plenty of bulbs available in stores right now, maybe even at bargain prices. Bulbs should be firm, heavy, and in good condition. The tunic (skin) should be smooth, have good color, and be free from injury.

Choose a planting site in full sun, but with protection from the hottest midday summer sun if possible. Planting under or near large deciduous trees that cast filtered shade works well. A few plants that withstand partial shade include daffodils, some tulips, some hardy lilies, some crocus, Siberian squill (*Scilla*), checkered lily (*Fritillaria*) and some windflowers (*Anemone*).

Bulbs should be planted in well-drained soil. Till soil deeply and incorporate three pounds of a complete fertilizer (such as 5-10-10) per 100 square feet as you are preparing the soil. If planting bulbs individually, toss a small amount of bulb starter fertilizer in the bottom of each hole before placing the bulb.

Recommended planting depths are given to the bottom of the bulb. Pick up a depth chart where you buy bulbs, but in general, for hyacinths, plant six inches deep; tulips, six inches or deeper; and daffodils, six to eight inches deep. Smaller bulbs in these groups and the minor bulbs are planted shallower. Large bulbs should be spaced four to six inches apart, small bulbs one to two inches.

For a greater effect, plant bulbs in clusters or irregular masses rather than singly. For a grouping to bloom at the same time and height, they should be planted at exactly the same depth. A beautiful backdrop is created when minor bulbs are grown with larger bulbs. Plant the large bulbs first, fill the hole in to the appropriate level for the minor bulbs, and then plant them.

Water well and cover the bulb bed with a layer of organic mulch. Mulch should be placed over bulbs planted very late in the season to extend the root development period. Remember that the fall and early winter is when bulbs do a lot of growing, especially roots.

Water is needed particularly during bud and foliage growth. If rainfall is scarce, apply additional water. Use a soaker hose or otherwise apply water at the soil line, rather than overhead sprinkling.

As bulbs finish blooming, remove faded blooms to eliminate seed set that reduces bulb growth. Maintain foliage for six weeks to assure good bulb growth and rebloom the following season. Do not cut or braid foliage, but allow it to die down naturally. Foliage can be removed when it turns yellow, falls over, and comes loose when slightly tugged.

Over the years, flowers may become smaller or less abundant, indicating a need for dividing. After the foliage dies back completely, dig bulbs with a spading fork and separate them. Bulbs can be replanted right away or stored to replant in the fall. To store, remove all soil, air dry, place in a mesh bag (similar to an onion bag), and hang in a cool (65 to 70 degrees F), dark, well-ventilated area.

Ideally, bulbs should be planted in early to mid-fall, but I have had good success planting as late as Christmas. The important thing is to get them in before the ground freezes and cover them with a good layer of mulch. Happy gardening!

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.